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PREEMPTIVE WAR AND THE CHINESE JUST WAR TRADITION

THE 1969 SINO-SOVIET BORDER CONFLICTS ON ZHENBAO ISLAND

by

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Jody B. Dow is a U.S. Air Force logistician assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He graduated from Montana State University in 1991 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Applied Mathematics, Air Force Institute of Technology in 1998 with a Masters in Logistics Management and Air Force Institute of Technology in 2005 with a Masters in Air Mobility. He served as an Air Force acquisitions officer for 3 years and as a transportation/logistics readiness officer for 18 years. He has served in at base level (program office, air and ground transportation, logistics readiness) and at a Major Command. He has served across the globe, including Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and he is a graduated squadron and deputy group commander.



Abstract

This paper evaluates Chinese Just War traditions in the context of the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflicts to draw conclusions about characteristics of Chinese thinking of military preemption. The thesis of this work states that Chinese Just War tradition differs from the traditions of Western societies, and provides more flexibility in justifying the initiation of military action. Broader concepts of surprise and justified preemption combine to allow initiation of military actions where Western cultures might view the action as preventive or aggressive vice preemptive or defensive.

The paper first looks at the circumstances surrounding the buildup and eruption of hostilities along the Ussuri River on the northeastern border of China. Consensus among scholars shows the conflict as the result of a combination of factors including a history of tensions between the Russians/Soviets and the Chinese, Soviet and Chinese escalation along the border after a failed border negotiation in 1964, and Chinese philosophy regarding territorial integrity.

Secondly, the paper evaluates the Chinese actions in light of Western Just War traditions, showing that the ambush of Soviet troops at Zhenbao Island on March 2, 1969 is most appropriately categorized as preventive military action. Such actions are generally condemned in Western scholarly traditions.

Following the Western evaluation, the paper evaluates similar aspects of Chinese Just War tradition, targeting specifically how the Chinese culture perceives preemptive and preventive military actions. This discussion delves briefly into Chinese strategic culture, history, and the current military concept of active defense. Using this evaluation, the paper then compares the actions along the Ussuri River with Chinese traditions, confirming that Chinese military traditions provide a different perception of preventive and preemptive military action than do Western traditions.

Finally, the paper briefly considers the potential impacts of the differences in perspective between Chinese and Western Just War traditions. The Chinese have a more flexible concept of preemption, and essentially combine prevention and preemption into active defense that allows both preemptive/preventive 'defense' and encourages offensive deterrence, where short intense military action against an enemy can alter the strategic calculus, thereby creating deterrence without engaging in a major campaign. This creates a dangerous situation where strategists on both sides can easily misperceive actions taken by the opposite member without understanding the original intent of the strategic decision maker.

The paper recommends additional study for Western strategists in comparing Chinese Just War traditions and active defense concepts with current Western traditions and standards.

I. Introduction

This paper explores China's Just War tradition and shows how surprise, active defense and preemption allow the Chinese more flexibility in justifying the use of military force than Western cultures.

The US has reemphasized China's importance in foreign policy. Asia is a major player in international politics and military power, and it is important we understand this reemerging civilization and its approach to the use of military force.

"The Chinese approach to world order was...vastly different from the system that took hold in the West."¹ China's power has traditionally been regional, influencing surrounding peoples, but aloof from far off civilizations. Neighbors were assimilated or used as buffers against aggressive foreigners. When China engaged in international relations, it came with a unique perspective. "[F]oreign envoys did not come to the imperial court to engage in negotiations or affairs of state; they "came to be transformed" by the Emperor's civilizing influence ...to recognize his overlordship. When the Chinese court deigned to send envoys abroad, they were not diplomats, but "Heavenly Envoys" from the Celestial Court."²

Additionally, the thought patterns of both Chinese and Western diplomats are ethnocentric. In the mid-1800s, "The British...addressed the Chinese court on equal terms, which would have struck the British ruling group as affording a non-Western country an uncommon degree of dignity, while being treated in China as insubordinate insolence."³ Today, China has a different worldview, but retains much of its deep cultural heritage, and Western nations still have challenges interacting with China.

This paper evaluates one historical incident to gain understanding on Chinese Just War perspectives, specifically preemptive military action. In 1969, the Soviet Union and China

engaged in a series of border conflicts on the Ussuri River in northeastern China/southeastern USSR. These clashes were not isolated events, but the culmination of a series of incidents beginning much earlier that shed light on how culture, history, and Chinese concepts of Just War pushed political leaders to engage in armed conflict. The first major incident in March 1969 evolved into a months-long border skirmish.⁴

II. The Ambush

We can trace the actions leading to the 1969 border war back to 1964, when Sino-Soviet border negotiations stalled. As a result, some disputes were resolved, but the underlying tensions remained. Between 1964 and 1969 border tension gradually increased. The Soviets “doubled their number of troops in the Far East in less than four years and adopted an assertive, forward-patrolling posture in disputed areas, especially on the islands in the eastern sector.”⁵

In February 1966, the USSR signed a treaty with Mongolia, extending their presence on China’s northern border across the country’s width. Soviet bases in Mongolia grew in strength and permanence. Mao had predicted a Soviet invasion for years and was convinced they would strike before 1968. Instead, the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia, and promulgated the Brezhnev doctrine, verbalizing the USSR’s leadership role, including the ability “to interfere in the affairs of socialist states.” In November 1968, Mao speculated that, “the [US] and the [USSR]...are preparing to spread the war.”⁶ Mao’s perspective demonstrated “a clear link between the Soviet military posture and China’s willingness to use force.”⁷ Mao also believed war was inevitable; “All in all, now there is neither war nor revolution. Such a situation will not last long.”⁸

China began planning for a forceful border confrontation in 1968. “After the clash on Qiliqin Island that left five Chinese dead, the [Central Military Commission] instructed [local commanders] to increase their alert status and strengthen border defense preparations.”⁹ Mao

ordered these preparations, which included an ambush that would become the March 2, 1969 Zhenbao Island incident.¹⁰ As winter arrived, confrontations increased and shifted from Qiliqin to Zhenbao Island. The derailed 1964 negotiations set the main navigation channel as the international border. However, when the Chinese attempted to patrol islands on their side, the Soviets would forcibly evict them. Between December 1968 and February 1969, nine confrontations occurred on Zhenbao, including one where “Soviet border guards beat twenty-eight Chinese soldiers, thirteen seriously.”¹¹ However, the first use of firearms came on February 6, 1969, when “Soviets fired warning shots at a Chinese patrol.”¹²

On March 2, 1969, “the Chinese brutally ambushed and killed the Soviet post commander and a number of his men.”¹³ This attack, initiated by the Chinese, “left several score dead and wounded. The second, on March 15, apparently initiated by the Soviets as retaliation,”¹⁴ led to a summer of violence across China’s northern border, with regular skirmishes and the threat of nuclear escalation. “Soviet troops along the Chinese border grew to some forty-two divisions—over a million men. Middle-level Soviet officials began to inquire of acquaintances at comparable levels around the world how their governments would react to a Soviet preemptive attack on Chinese nuclear installations.”¹⁵

In May, Mao ordered a country-wide mobilization against the Soviet threat during a Central Cultural Revolution Group meeting. “Every county should establish a [militia] regiment, this should be done all over the country. In a big county, three battalions should be established; in a middle-sized county, two battalions; and in a small county, one battalion.... Once we are prepared, if the enemy does not come, that does not matter. We are now confronted with a formidable enemy. It is advantageous to have the mobilization and the preparation.... We will

try to gain mastery by striking the enemy only after he has struck. Our nuclear bases should be prepared...for the enemy's air bombardment.”¹⁶

Later that spring, a report to Mao by four Chinese Marshals shows the depth of the conflict. “The Soviet revisionists have made China their main enemy, imposing a more serious threat to our security than the US imperialism. The Soviet revisionists are creating tensions along the long Sino-Soviet border, concentrating troops in the border area and making military intrusions. They are ...forcing some Asian countries to join an anti-China ring of encirclement... All these are serious steps...in preparation for a war of aggression against China.”¹⁷

A cease-fire went into effect on September 11, 1969, and border talks resumed in October. Violence ceased, and the conflict ended “in 1999 when Russia, China, and the other border successor states of the now former Soviet Union signed the text of a final agreement outlining in detail the exact location of the border.”¹⁸

III. Ambush and Chinese Just War Tradition

“This use of force represented a stark departure from Beijing's delaying strategy in the dispute with Moscow following the effort to compromise during the 1964 talks.”¹⁹ Several questions emerge from Zhenbao; what precipitated the Chinese ambush? In Western traditions, was Zhenbao a preemptive attack or preventive war? And how does China define Zhenbao in their Just War tradition?

A. What Precipitated the Attack

Fravel contends the clashes were part of a larger Sino-Soviet rivalry. “When China launched its ambush on Zhenbao, it signaled not only its resolve to defend its territorial claims that the Soviet Union had threatened but also its commitment to resist Soviet coercion more broadly.”²⁰ The USSR pushed the fledgling PRC into Korea only months after gaining power in

Beijing, and continued to shape the progress of communist China. The USSR viewed itself as the center of a global revolution with authority to guide actions across the communist world.

Others point to Mao's desire to re-enter international politics after 20 years of isolation, contending Mao orchestrated the ambush to facilitate Sino-US rapprochement. Kissinger pointed to the "Soviet troop concentrations" and a large confrontation in Xinjiang in the fall of 1968 that resulted in a massive Chinese mobilization as proof that, "resumption of contact with the United States had become a strategic necessity."²¹ A recently discovered alternative states China had a desire to convince the US it was a worthy ally fighting the Soviet threat.

Additionally, the ambush led US leaders to conclude that, "the Soviet Union was the probable aggressor... This suspicion was confirmed by a [RAND study which] concluded that because the incidents took place close to Soviet supply bases and far from Chinese ones, the Soviets were the probable aggressors, and that the next step might well be an attack on China's nuclear facilities."²² Kissinger said he later learned the Chinese initiated the ambush, but believed the actions were defensive. The Chinese "planned the particular incident to shock the Soviet leadership into putting an end to a series of clashes along the border... The offensive deterrence concept involves the use of a preemptive strategy not so much to defeat the adversary militarily as to deal him a psychological blow to cause him to desist."²³

Finally, Robinson posits a combination of factors. "The Chinese motivation...was a complex amalgam of Maoist arrogance and international political calculation; fear that unless some direct action were taken, the Soviet Union might invade China; and excessive Cultural Revolution anti-Soviet zeal."²⁴ He notes the buildup of forces along the border post-1964, "the Cultural Revolution-induced Chinese excesses along the border, and the continuation of the general decline in Sino-Soviet relations that had begun a decade earlier. These made some sort

of explosion, somewhere, inevitable. But China did plan the March 2 ambush at ...Zhenbao on Mao's explicit orders."²⁵

One can conclude China's main objective was to deter a Sino-Soviet war and bolster its claim on the islands on the Chinese side of the navigation channel. Their motivation was a combination of historical indignation, philosophical necessity, and military predisposition. History shaped Beijing's perceptions of the Soviet threat and intentions. Philosophy drove the strategic calculus of the importance of uninhabited river border islands. And the military predisposed itself to conflict within the structure of "Active Defense."

Historical Sino-Russian conflicts include 1964-to-1969 border tensions, Mao's relationship with the Soviets, and memories of Russian conflicts that extend centuries into the past. "One cultural trait regularly invoked by Chinese leaders was their historic perspective—the ability, indeed the necessity, to think of time in categories different from the West's. Whatever an individual Chinese leader achieves is brought about in a time frame that represents a smaller fraction of his society's total experience than any other leader in the world."²⁶

In 1860, the Russians played a starring role in starting China's "Century of Humiliation." As the Qing Dynasty declined, the Russians saw opportunity in "the lightly administered and ambiguously demarcated expanses of Manchuria (the Manchu heartland in northeast China), Mongolia (the then quasi-autonomous tribal steppe at China's north), and Xinjiang (the expanse of mountains and deserts in the far west, then populated mostly by Muslim peoples)."²⁷ Russia encroached in these areas with bribes and threats as the European powers pushed China from the sea. "At the moment of China's maximum peril Russia surfaced as a colonial power, offering to mediate in the 1860 conflict—which was, in fact, a way of threatening to intervene. Artful—others might argue duplicitous—diplomacy was underpinned by the implicit threat of force."²⁸

During the revolutionary period (1921-1949), Soviet support for Mao ebbed and flowed. As Mao moved farther from Soviet ideology, the conflicts increased. “China’s leaders had not forgotten...that the Soviet Union was still claiming the validity of concessions in northern China extracted from Chiang Kai-shek in wartime agreements in 1945. Stalin took for granted Soviet dominance in the Communist world, a stance incompatible in the long run with Mao’s fierce nationalism and claim to ideological importance.”²⁹ After Stalin, Khrushchev moved the USSR from commitment to aloofness as he increased troops along China’s northern border.³⁰

In philosophy, China places priority on territorial integrity. Fravel links China’s border disputes with perceived security; when China feels insecure, it is more likely to use military force. Historically, “China has used force in frontier disputes with its militarily most powerful neighbors, the very states that could mount a challenge to China in the local balance of forces.”³¹ Tied with the historical perspective on Russia, the strength of the USSR in the 1960s, and the rising tensions on the border, Chinese leaders saw a need to stand firm against the Soviets.

Militarily, China followed the concept of Active Defense. “In April 1955, Mao once more elaborated on ‘active defense’ and termed it ‘China’s strategic guiding principle.’ Then as so many times before, he gave the strategy a new twist, saying, ‘China will never make a preemptive attack [against other countries]’ and yet, he elaborated, ‘Active defense is defense in offensive posture.’”³² Mao’s guidance provided the military with an ambiguous and flexible construct for applying force. Offensive maneuvers categorized as active defense allow China to proclaim victim status, even if they initiated the actions. “As some candid PLA theorists admit, in the name of ‘active defense,’ China’s armies have shifted to the offensive in all local conventional conflicts since 1949. As a case in point, in the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969,

the PLA deliberately escalated the crisis by ambushing a Soviet company on the disputed Zhenbao Island and legitimated the unprovoked attacks as ‘active defense.’”³³

Scobell proposes China’s Active Defense is dualistic. “The two main strands are a Confucian one, which is conflict-averse and defensive-minded, and a Realpolitik one that favors military solutions and is offensive-minded. Both of these two strands are active and both influence and combine in dialectic fashion to produce what I label a ‘Chinese Cult of Defense.’ ... This cult predisposes Chinese leaders paradoxically to engage in offensive military operations as a primary alternative in pursuit of national goals, while rationalizing these actions as being purely defensive and a last resort.”³⁴

Understanding China’s strategic culture, the next step is categorizing Chinese actions on Zhenbao. Was this another battle in a de facto war, a preemptive attack, or the beginning of a preventive war? The following starts with a Western/International Just War perspective to categorize the actions, then examines China’s Just War tradition evaluate consistency with the Western/International perspective.

B. War, Preemption, Prevention or Defense?

There are four possible categorizations for the Zhenbao incident of March 2, 1969; action in a continuing war, a preemptive attack, a preventive attack, or a defensive action against an aggressor. I will evaluate each of these briefly according to Western concepts of Just War.

If the ambush was part of an ongoing war, then it started before March 2, 1969. In reviews of Western and Chinese Just War concepts, the predominant phraseology is ‘use of armed force;’ there are not specifics on how much or what type of force is required to declare the actions a war. As theoretical constructs, rules or guidelines described in the literature (Hensel’s eight Jus ad Bellum categories of goal, legitimate authority, right intentions, just cause, last resort, proportionality, prospect for success, and declaration³⁵) appear to reference any

sanctioned use of force, and imply the intent for some logical conclusion. Sino-Soviet border skirmishes had been happening for years, but neither considered them a war; the incidents were isolated, separated, and incidental. There was no planned campaign to engage in a particular place or time until March 2, 1969.

Skirmishes prior to that date included the limited use of military force, but do not appear deliberately planned. Both sides had normal border forces and used them in protecting against incursions. There was no declaration of hostilities by either side before or after Zhenbao. These particulars lead to the conclusion that there was not a Sino-Soviet war prior to March 2, 1969. However, the character and nature of the ambush was fundamentally different than previous incidental skirmishes.

Secondly, Zhenbao should not be considered a preemptive attack. Western definitions require two criteria be met for preemption: “First, there must be unambiguous knowledge of the offending party’s intention to launch an unjust, offensive attack and, second, the anticipated attack must be imminent.”³⁶ Mao predicted an “imminent” Soviet attack for years. However, the Soviets displayed no sudden behavioral changes and no decisive troop concentrations, and there is no evidence pointing to an imminent Soviet attack. Western standards define imminent as days or hours; this does not fit Mao’s definition of a years-long imminent threat. Chinese actions were not preemptive.

Preventive war is offensive military action taken to thwart some future, but not imminent, security threat. In Western traditions, “there was virtual universal rejection of the concept of preventive war.”³⁷ Rejecting the legality, however, does not eliminate the possibility. If Chinese actions were offensive, planned to address the threat of a future Soviet invasion, and with no imminent threat or unambiguous warning, then the actions were preventative. In fact, plans for

the ambush were started a year in advance and the operation was specifically to counter a future Soviet invasion, so two of the three criteria are confirmed. I will discuss the third criteria after we look at the defensive possibility.

The fourth option, that Chinese actions were defensive, implies the Soviets were the offenders, or that this was a unique situation where both were defensive. “[T]he Chinese sources claim they were objectively defensive since, if the Soviets had not taken military action, no battle would have occurred and thus no blood would have been shed.”³⁸ The Chinese obviously baited the Soviets with tactics used repeatedly over the past several years. At the tactical level, both sides were protecting what they viewed as sovereign territory. The Chinese plan of “‘striking back in self-defense’ via an ambush on that island through use of a Chinese patrol as bait”³⁹ was clearly escalation. Interestingly, prior to March 1969, the Chinese had specific orders prohibited escalation; “Chinese forces should respond to Soviet actions only with the same level of force. The firing of small arms was prohibited unless Chinese units were first fired upon and then fired two sets of warning shots.”⁴⁰

The Soviets had more physical control over Zhenbao, but neither occupied the island full-time. This provides some support for the Soviet perspective of defending held territory. However, according to the 1964 proposals, Zhenbao was on the Chinese side of the main navigation channel, supporting the Chinese position of defending their borders. Another factor is the consideration of retaliation, or retribution. The legitimacy of preemptive self-defense as is debatable, but self-defense is not; “Some analysts rejected any form of anticipatory, preemptive self-defense, stressing that the offending side must be culpable in actually having committed a wrong for there to be just cause for retribution.”⁴¹ If one looks at the Soviet brutality

(beating/killing Chinese personnel who ventured to the disputed islands, and escalating to use of firearms for warning shots), it appears there may be some justification for Chinese retribution.

In the third (preventive) and fourth (defensive) cases, the intent of Chinese and Soviet leadership is important. China appeared to be defending territorial sovereignty and integrity. Soviet leadership intentions are not clear; on the ground, Soviet military members appeared to be defending claimed territory that they routinely patrolled and secured.

Based on this analysis, the Chinese actions are curiously both defensive and offensive. The ambush was defensive, designed to protect territory claimed by China. China viewed Soviet patrols as incursions, though the Soviets may not have understood them in that sense. However, the ambush, which was a significant increase in force, was also offensive. There was no imminent threat, and though confrontations had been increasing, the substantial jump in violence has to be attributed to deliberate Chinese plans and actions.

The only area of contention on this point deals with the concept of declaration. Western theorists “all agree that armed force should only be used as a last resort in the resolution of conflicts and...there was general agreement that there must be a reasonable prospect for victory, and that there must be a declaration prior to the actual initiation of hostilities.”⁴² The hostilities across the border (on both sides) were undeclared. Based on the territorial nature of the dispute, both sides believed they were protecting their sovereign territory, and that incursions by the other side precipitated an act of war, which (at least in their minds) negated their requirement for any declaration of hostilities.

My assessment is that the Zhenbao ambush was preventive. There is a very small basis for retaliation, but not significant enough to justify the proportion of force used by the Chinese. Based on the deliberate offensive and aggressive nature of the ambush, with no immediate

security threat, and the intent of the actions to thwart future Soviet actions, the attack was predominantly preventive. In the next section, I will evaluate Chinese Just War thought to determine if their conception of Just War criteria is consistent with Western philosophies.

C. China's Just War Tradition

The previous analysis assumed China follows Western Just War traditions. Sun-Tzu's famous maxim that knowing yourself and your enemy will bring victory⁴³ motivates our study of how potential adversaries think about and prepare for war. China has a definable strategic culture that draws from current and classical thought, and influences China's decision process when considering the use of force.

The Chinese way of war has several enduring characteristics, including "the use of deception and surprise whenever possible, from the small-unit tactical level up to the national strategic level; in battle confusing, luring, and trapping the enemy is a PLA hallmark," and, "the primacy of offensive operations over defensive."⁴⁴ China thinks of war differently; "Where the Western tradition prized the decisive clash of forces emphasizing feats of heroism, the Chinese ideal stressed subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage."⁴⁵ The Great Wall shows "Chinese preference for defense over offense, positional warfare over mobile warfare, and maintenance over expansion."⁴⁶ In contrast, the Great Wall also shows China's realist thought reflected in its "tradition that views war as a central feature of interstate relations;"⁴⁷ if war were not a regular part of society, what would be the use of the wall?

Moreover, China has a unique worldview. "Chinese in the mainstream Confucian tradition...hold that human nature is good or perhaps just neutral and can profit from education and the collective wisdom of the past."⁴⁸ History has a significant influence on strategic thought. Traditional Chinese history placed the Han ethnic group, the core of China, in the center of the world's civilization; those outside were marginalized and considered barbarians. This may have

contributed to the pacifist tendencies, as others were viewed as somewhat less than Chinese. On the opposite side China has an incredibly long border, which resulted in a wealth of conflict. Today, China's land borders touch 14 countries, which drives a realpolitik aspect of China's political development. Finally, China experienced a critical "awakening" and endured the "century of humiliation" when more powerful outside cultures forced themselves on the scene.

Kissinger described Chinese strategy as follows; "A successful commander waits before charging headlong into battle. He shies away from an enemy's strength; he spends his time observing and cultivating changes in the strategic landscape. He studies the enemy's preparations and his morale, husband's resources and defines them carefully, and plays on his opponent's psychological weaknesses—until at last he perceives the opportune moment to strike the enemy at his weakest point. He then deploys his resources swiftly and suddenly, rushing "downhill" along the path of least resistance, in an assertion of superiority that careful timing and preparation have rendered a *fait accompli*."⁴⁹ This description aptly fits the Zhenbao ambush.

China's long history and Confucian philosophy shapes their view of time. There is no necessity to solve problems instantly; China believes it will be around for a long time, and solutions to problems will come, even if they do not come quickly. While not specifically creating a pacifist philosophy, deferring issues until a better time can make China appear pacifist to outside observers with a different time orientation. This perspective of time also supports a realpolitik view as situations can be deferred until the period of maximum advantage.

Predicting when or how China will use force requires we evaluate their dualistic perspective including pacifist and realpolitik considerations. Just war, including competent authority and right intention, are part of China's tradition, though in a different way than in Western prescriptions. "The idea of just war (*yi zhan*) is an ancient one. Confucius adopted this

idea, and Mao adsorbed it. The distinction is simple: just wars are good wars and unjust wars are bad ones. Just wars are those fought by oppressed groups against oppressors; unjust wars are ones waged by oppressors against the oppressed. Since China has long been oppressed – enduring more than a century of humiliation – it follows that any war China wages is a just one, even a war in which China strikes first.”⁵⁰ The head of the government was a culturally sanctioned authority figure for the decision to use force.⁵¹ Finally, “It was the intent or motive of the violence that was important. If a battle or war was waged in order to educate, punish, or ‘restore the correct order of things,’ then the war was ‘righteous’ (yi).”⁵²

Consistent with Western tradition, China views force as a last resort,⁵³ and sees war as an art, where battle begins with the wits, and “those who master the art have the best hope of winning without fighting.”⁵⁴ Finally, “...the Chinese profess to place a higher strategic, even moral value on tranquility and peace.”⁵⁵

Today’s China was born in revolution, and lived with conflict for much of its 64 years. “Mao Zedong...considered the global struggle for dominance a constant and major war an inevitability.”⁵⁶ The Chinese tend to use force differently than Western societies, where war once initiated becomes the primary focus, and starts a process that should end with military victory and political peace. China, “In modern times, ...typically denigrated the West’s ‘stress on military force’...and adopted a ‘force avoidance’...or low-posture stance. Veiled threats and brief-strike military ‘lessons’ reflect this classical legacy in modern-day China.”⁵⁷

Scobell’s treatment of the Chinese “Cult of Defense” lays out the following core elements: 1) the Chinese are a peace-loving nation; 2) they are not aggressive or expansionist; and 3) they use force only in self-defense. Additionally, when dealing with external threats, they fight only “just” wars and frame their actions within the strategic concept of “active defense.”⁵⁸

In active defense, Chinese thinkers diverge from Western Just War notions. First, “‘active defense’ can justify preemption even before the enemy has struck because the enemy *intended* to strike first, the thought being equal to the deed.”⁵⁹ In consideration of preemption (or prevention), the timeframe on threat is non-existent, where Western tradition requires an imminent threat. Additionally, Mao saw deterrence in a unique light. Western deterrence was viewed as passive; Mao preferred to hold the initiative. Essentially, he chose preemption, “anticipating an attack by launching the first blow.”⁶⁰ But even the philosophy of preemption was different in Mao’s approach. His focus was using preemption to alter the “psychological balance, not so much to defeat the enemy as to alter his calculus of risks.”⁶¹ The standard profile of military action between 1954 and 1979 was “a sudden blow followed quickly by a political phase.”⁶² Changing the opponent’s psychological balance created true deterrence. This creates a challenge for Sino-US relations; “When the Chinese view of preemption encounters the Western concept of deterrence, a vicious circle can result: acts conceived as defensive in China may be treated as aggressive by the outside world; deterrent moves by the West may be interpreted in China as encirclement.”⁶³

Therefore, the Chinese Just War tradition merges preemption and prevention into active defense, opening the military’s aperture for legitimate use of force beyond that of the West.

Finally, dealing with retribution or retaliation, Western traditions focus on military actions. Chinese traditions view any actions that affect China as potential for retribution or retaliation. “If an enemy irreparably violates China’s sovereignty, it is deemed to have struck first and any ‘no first strike’ restraints disappear.”⁶⁴ Again, this opens the aperture for use of force beyond that of Western militaries.

Based on this evaluation of Chinese Just War tradition, China acted within the concept of active defense. A legitimate authority ordered the use of force (Mao), and the attacks were in response to actions they deemed violated their national sovereignty (border incursions).

IV. Conclusions

Zhenbao highlights several differences between Western and Chinese Just War traditions, and provides a useful study of Chinese strategic thought. Different concepts of preemption and prevention, tied into active defense, provide a more flexible framework for Chinese leaders, who “view China as a defensive power, but this does not mean that China will shy away from conflict. On the contrary, China is prone to resort to force in a crisis.”⁶⁵

Mao’s military actions throughout much of the Cold War were “improbably and, on paper at least, impossible affairs.”⁶⁶ Western strategists were caught off-guard in what they viewed as secondary strategic areas; North Korea, the Taiwan Strait, China’s Himalayan border, and the Ussuri River. “Mao was determined to prevent encirclement by any power or combination of powers, regardless of ideology, that he perceived as ...surrounding China, by disrupting their calculations.”⁶⁷ Understanding this is valuable for America’s strategy. Non-military actions could have military implications if China deems them as sovereignty violations.

Secondly, Zhenbao reminds us that simple events are often clouded by complex histories, and evaluations taken in isolation will be inherently flawed. In addition, the characterization of any incident is dependent on worldview, history, and perspective. “In such cases [territorial disputes], the employment of the PLA to uphold China’s claims of sovereignty, while seen as offensive and/or threatening in other capitals, is viewed as purely defensive in Beijing.”⁶⁸ The Chinese have a long and rich history, and are more connected to that history than many Western leaders, especially in the US. They will not forget their history, and the past will inform their present and future actions. We ignore the history of others at our peril.

Finally, simplistic descriptions of a strategic culture will cover nuances. China will combine Realpolitik and Confucian models while remaining primarily defensive-minded.

“Paradoxically, the Cult of Defense produces a Beijing ready to employ military force assertively against perceived external or internal threats all the while insisting that China possesses a cultural aversion to using force, doing so only defensively and solely as a last resort.”⁶⁹

The challenge for today’s leaders is to understand cultures from their strategic perspective, not our own.



Appendix 1 – The Ambush

The first Damansky/Zhenbao incident took place on March 2, 1969. It was clearly initiated by the Chinese side. The previous night, about three hundred Chinese frontier guards and regular army soldiers, dressed in white camouflage, had crossed the solidly frozen Ussuri River, dug foxholes in a wooded area overlooking the southernmost extremity of the island, laid telephone wire to the command post on the Chinese bank, and lay down for the night on straw mats.

Early the next morning, the duty man on the Soviet outpost south of the island reported activity on the Chinese bank. Around 11:00 a.m., a group of twenty or thirty armed Chinese moved toward the island shouting Maoist slogans. The Soviet outpost commander, Lieutenant Strelnikov, and a number of his subordinates set off for the southern extremity in two armored personnel carriers (APCs), a truck, and a command car. Arriving on the island, Strelnikov and several others dismounted and moved out to warn off the oncoming Chinese, as they had done several times previously. Following a procedure developed for such occasions, the Soviets strapped their automatic rifles to their chests (reports differ: some say they left their weapons behind) and linked arms to prevent the Chinese from passing.

A verbal altercation took place at this point as the Soviets, in Chinese, attempted to warn the other group away. The Chinese now arrayed themselves in rows and appeared to be unarmed. But when the Chinese had advanced to about twenty feet from the Soviet group, the first row suddenly scattered to the side, exposing the second line of Chinese, who quickly pulled submachine guns from under their coats and opened fire on the Russians. Strelnikov and six of his companions were killed outright. Simultaneously, from an ambush to the Soviets' right, the three hundred Chinese in foxholes also opened fire, catching the entire Soviet unit by surprise. Mortar, machine gun, and anti-tank gunfire also commenced at that moment from the Chinese side. The Chinese then charged the Soviets, and hand-to-hand fighting ensued. The Soviet unit was overrun, and the Chinese took nineteen prisoners and killed them on the spot. They also carried away Soviet equipment, which they later put on display.... A series of melees ensued, with charges by both sides.... The entire battle lasted about two hours.... Although both sides claimed victory, neither Soviet nor Chinese forces remained permanently on the island after the battle.⁷⁰

NOTES

- ¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 16.
- ² Ibid., 18. (Kissinger)
- ³ Ibid., 37. (Kissinger)
- ⁴ See Appendix 1 for a detailed description of the 2 March 1969 ambush.
- ⁵ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 203.
- ⁶ Mao Zedong in a conversation with E.F. Hill, 28 Nov 1968. Recorded in the Chinese Communist Party Central Archives and translated by David L. Wilson and Chen Jian, "New Evidence on the Sino-American Opening," *Cold War International History Project*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (Washington, DC) Issue 11, Winter 1998, 159.
- ⁷ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 203.
- ⁸ Mao Zedong in a conversation with E.F. Hill, 28 Nov 1968. Recorded in the Chinese Communist Party Central Archives and translated by David L. Wilson and Chen Jian, "New Evidence on the Sino-American Opening," *Cold War International History Project*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (Washington, DC) Issue 11, Winter 1998, 161.
- ⁹ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 203.
- ¹⁰ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 48-49.
- ¹¹ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 208.
- ¹² Ibid., 208. (Fravel)
- ¹³ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 49-50.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Ryan, Finkelstein & Devitt), (New York) 2003, 198.
- ¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 217.
- ¹⁶ Mao Zedong's talk at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (Excerpt), 15 Mar 1969. Recorded in *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shilu [A Factual History of the People's Republic of China]* (Changchun: Jilin People's Press, 1994), vol. 3, Part 1, pp 467-469], and translated by David L. Wilson and Chen Jian, "New Evidence on the Sino-American Opening," *Cold War International History Project*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (Washington, DC) Issue 11, Winter 1998, 161-162.
- ¹⁷ Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xianqian & Nie Rongzhen, Report by Four Marshals to the Central Committee, "A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation" (excerpt). Recorded in *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao [Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Party History Materials*, no. 42, (June 1992), pp 70-75] and translated by David L. Wilson and Chen Jian, "New Evidence on the Sino-American Opening," *Cold War International History Project*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, (Washington, DC) Issue 11, Winter 1998, 166-167.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Ryan, Finkelstein & Devitt), (New York) 2003, 198.
- ¹⁹ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 201-202.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 203 (Fravel)
- ²¹ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 213.
- ²² Ibid., 216. (Kissinger)
- ²³ Ibid., 217. (Kissinger)
- ²⁴ Thomas Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Ryan, Finkelstein & McDevitt), (New York) 2003, 210.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 203. (Robinson)
- ²⁶ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 245.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 68. (Kissinger)

- ²⁸ Ibid., 68. (Kissinger)
- ²⁹ Ibid., 98. (Kissinger)
- ³⁰ Ibid., 162. (Kissinger)
- ³¹ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 173.
- ³² John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 40.
- ³³ Ibid., 31. (Lewis & Xue)
- ³⁴ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 15.
- ³⁵ Howard M. Hensel, "Theocentric Natural Law and Just War Doctrine," *The Legitimate Use of Military Force: The Just War Tradition and the Customary Law of Armed Conflict*, pp 5-27, edited by Howard M. Hensel, (Burlington, VT) 2008, 5-6.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 14. (Hensel 2008)
- ³⁷ Ibid., 14. (Hensel 2008)
- ³⁸ Thomas Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Ryan, Finkelstein & Devitt), (New York) 2003, 208.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 208. (Robinson)
- ⁴⁰ Taylor M. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ) 2008, 211.
- ⁴¹ Howard M. Hensel, "Theocentric Natural Law and Just War Doctrine," *The Legitimate Use of Military Force: The Just War Tradition and the Customary Law of Armed Conflict*, pp 5-27, edited by Howard M. Hensel, (Burlington, VT) 2008, 14.
- ⁴² Howard M. Hensel, "Theocentric Natural Law and Just War Doctrine," *The Legitimate Use of Military Force: The Just War Tradition and the Customary Law of Armed Conflict*, pp 5-27, edited by Howard M. Hensel, (Burlington, VT) 2008, 14.
- ⁴³ Sun-Tzu, "The Art of War," *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, translated by Ralph D. Sawyer, (Boulder, CO) 1993, 162. The actual quote follows, "This it is said that one who knows the enemy and himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement."
- ⁴⁴ Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, (New York) 2003, 9.
- ⁴⁵ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 23.
- ⁴⁶ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 4.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 4. (Scobell)
- ⁴⁸ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 24.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 30. (Kissinger)
- ⁵⁰ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 34.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 20. (Scobell)
- ⁵² Ibid., 20. (Scobell)
- ⁵³ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 21.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 22. (Lewis & Xue)
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 24. (Lewis & Xue)
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 19. (Lewis & Xue)
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 23. (Lewis & Xue)
- ⁵⁸ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 27-28.

- ⁵⁹ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 41.
- ⁶⁰ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 133.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 133. (Kissinger)
- ⁶² Ibid., 133. (Kissinger)
- ⁶³ Ibid., 133. (Kissinger)
- ⁶⁴ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War*, (Stanford, CA) 2006, 43.
- ⁶⁵ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 193.
- ⁶⁶ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 2011, 103.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 103. (Kissinger)
- ⁶⁸ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, (New York) 2003, 193.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 193. (Scobell)
- ⁷⁰ Thomas Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Ryan, Finkelstein & Devitt), (New York) 2003, 199-201.



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